What constitutes ‘dangerous speech,’ and what can you do about it?

In the United States, courts have repeatedly protected the rights of those who make hateful comments and post racist images.

But the allowance of hate speech doesn’t mean there is unlimited free speech. The courts have also ruled that if someone makes a direct threat against another person or incites people to commit imminent violence, the speech is not protected and the government can intervene.

Susan Benesch, a professor at American University in Washington who directs the Dangerous Speech Project, clarifies that the difference between hate speech and dangerous speech (which can be text or graphic as well as spoken) largely depends on the context, where it is said, who is saying it, and to whom. Specifically, she looks out for:

- Speakers who are highly compelling and have a high degree of influence.
- Audiences who are more likely to act violently, owing to grievances or fears that the speaker can cultivate.
- The historical and social context of the speech, especially if it can be understood by its target audience as a call to violence. The context also plays a role when there have been long-standing competitions between groups for power or resources, lack of mechanisms to solve grievances, or previous violence, particularly if it was also motivated by inflammatory speech.
- The means of dissemination, especially if it is carried on an influential media channel such as a sole or primary news source or a popular social media profile.

Benesch’s research points to notable examples of speech that helped incite violence, such as Rwandan Hutu propaganda in 1994 that claimed Tutsis posed an existential threat to Hutus, as well as Nazi assertions that Jews were planning to wipe out the German people before the Holocaust. She refers to incitement in the name of self-defense as “accusation in a mirror.” The target group can also be given dehumanizing labels such as “pests, vermin, insects or animals” or referred to as “foreign” or “alien” to make atrocities seem acceptable.

How to fight back

It is common to encounter dangerous speech online, such as in the form of tweets, Facebook postings or comments. In her paper “Considerations for Successful Counterspeech,” Benesch offers some advice on what to do when responding to it:

- Warn the speaker of consequences, not only to the target group but to themselves in the form of how public postings, which are essentially permanent, can be seen by current and future employers, friends and family and possibly result in the loss of a job or relationship.
- Explain why the speech is hateful, racist, bigoted, misogynist, etc., drawing upon the fact that most people do not see see themselves as such.
- Be respectful, and try to change the tone whether through empathy (e.g., I am also X, but …) or affiliation (e.g., What you said was hurtful to me as Y …).
- Use humor to help neutralize the message. Benesch points to the example of internet users

superimposing rubber duck heads on ISIS members as part of an effort to ridicule them and make them seem less intimidating.

It may be too much to hope that the original speaker would recant or apologize for the remarks. A more likely sign of success is if the speaker alters the discourse or even deletes the social media account.

Most often, the best answer to dangerous speech is more speech. If your response provokes a civil and robust debate, it can help dispel falsehoods and inspire others to take a stand against incitement.
